

## Second Sunday of Easter 2021

Why resurrection? Perhaps that seems like a strange question in this Easter season. But could there not have been another way in which God could be revealed? Why this way? The resurrection, like the cross, is the central mystery of Christian faith (mystery in its theological not Agatha Christie sense); indeed they are part of the one, saving reality. Indeed in John's gospel cross, resurrection, ascension and anointing with the spirit are one great event. No words can exhaust the meaning of cross and resurrection but there are some important themes. The first words that we hear from Jesus this morning are 'Peace be with you,' indeed so significant are these words of forgiveness that John has Jesus repeat them, 'Peace be with you' (he says it again to Thomas later on) and then he goes on 'As the Father has sent me, so I send you.' I think we can safely say that the very first experience of resurrection life involved forgiveness and being sent.

On Tuesday of Holy Week I attended the annual 'Chrism Mass' at the Cathedral in Goulburn. The Bishop presided over the blessing of the oils of unction - the oil of healing and of Catechumens, he consecrated the Chrism and then asked us all to reaffirm our ordination vows, before leading us in the Eucharist. As is my custom in Holy Week I had read through the ordination service and reminded myself of the day of my own ordination to the sacred priesthood. I recalled my feelings and emotions, because I wanted to feel once again the weight of the vows I had made and which I was about to reaffirm. It was a stifling hot evening in Wangaratta on that evening of Christ the King. I recall well the high point of the liturgy, having heard the Bishop read the exhortation and responded to the subsequent examination, my fellow candidate and I prostrated ourselves in the chancel, the Holy Spirit was invoked and individually we approached the Bishop. In the power of the Holy Spirit the Bishop prayed. I remember the hands of the bishop on my head and my fellow priests massed around me, their hands heavy on me; the heat was extraordinary. My stole was removed from my shoulder and placed around my neck and I was vested in a chasuble, the palms of my hands were anointed and I was presented with a chalice and paten. The bishop then presented me with a copy of the scriptures and said:

*Take authority to preach the word of God, and to minister the holy sacraments in the congregation where you are appointed. Whose sins you forgive they are forgiven; whose sins you retain they are retained. Be a faithful minister of God and of his holy sacraments.*

With those words ringing in my ears, the Bishop was the first to offer me and my companion the greeting of peace.

*Whose sins you forgive they are forgiven; whose sins you retain they are retained.* I have long pondered over those words, and what they might

mean. At the time I wondered would I have to refuse forgiveness and under what circumstances. I thought about the disciples, how could they retain the sins of any after experiencing themselves this utterly gracious presence of Jesus among them as the embodiment of forgiveness? Had they done anything to deserve Jesus' forgiving presence with them at that moment? Had Jesus himself shown any hint of retaining their sin? (It might surprise you to know that these words are peculiar to the Anglican ordination rite. They don't appear in the Roman rite). I have never refused to offer God's forgiveness to a penitent, Jesus' injunction to Peter that he forgive seventy times seven has always reminded me of the demands of this ministry. But I have come to think that Jesus is not asking me or any of us to retain sins at all. In fact completely the opposite. The risen Jesus is telling his disciples that forgiveness withheld is the antithesis of resurrection life.

We can't really get the resurrection unless we appreciate the central place of forgiveness. This is *why* resurrection. Rowan Williams wrote: "There is no hope of understanding the Resurrection outside the process of renewing humanity in forgiveness. We are all agreed that the empty tomb proves nothing. We need to add that no amount of apparitions, however well authenticated, would mean anything either, apart from the testimony of forgiven lives communicating forgiveness."

The resurrection was an experience of forgiveness. The disciples had all abandoned Jesus, becoming complicit with his murderers. The fact that the resurrection was happening to them was an experience of forgiveness for them. After the crushing events of Holy Week Jesus' presence is one of forgiveness. And re-commissions the disciples to spread a message of forgiveness, he hires not those who appear blameless or somehow most worthy. *He hires those who truly know that they themselves have been forgiven.*

Our Risen Lord comes to us today once again in the Holy Sacrament of Communion. He comes to say to us, "Peace be with you." Not only that, he comes to call us. He comes to hire us to help spread the news. He comes to ask us to extend this word of healing, life-giving forgiveness to others, we are they who are called to speak of what we have heard, what we have seen with our eyes, what we have looked at and touched with our hands, concerning the word of life. The folk we mix with, work with, play with and learn with can all enter into resurrection joy, but they can't bypass us we who have seen and felt and heard, this is our commission. "If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them." And there's also this second part about, "if you retain the sins of any, they are retained." But after you yourself have had your sins forgiven, could you really retain the sins of another? It seems that Jesus has hired the right people, after all. Amen.